

**Parent-Child Play, A Foundation for Positive Relationships:  
Replacing Stumbling Blocks with Building Blocks**

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**June 23, 2010**

Paper presented at *Child's Play, Children's Pleasures: Interdisciplinary Explorations*, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, March 20, 2010.

*Abstract*

Parenthood brings many responsibilities both economic and social. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these rarely include the mandate to play with your children. Yet, this emotionally rich experience holds the promise of bringing parents and children together for a mutually rewarding time. This paper explores the goals that parents have for their children and ways in which parent-child play can help both parents and children achieve these goals. It presents an overview of the stumbling blocks to parent child play, particularly in the preschool years while considering ways in which the community can help facilitate children's play with parents through the creation of play friendly places and messages.

*Introduction*

By the time adults become parents, many have forgotten the importance of play in their own lives. Others have lost the effortless ability to enter the play frame, making it difficult for them to understand the process and value of play in the lives of children. Unlike adults who

see “being serious” as a key characteristic of both learning and adulthood, children, particularly young children, readily adopt the spirit of play in their learning encounters. Through exploration, children find out what objects and people do, what places contain and what affordances they provide. In play, children make sense out of this information, creating variations in actions and endings, taking risks in communicating with themselves and others, exploring emotions and putting together ideas.

Although parents assert that their relationship with their children is of prime importance, they frequently do not know how to nurture it. The infant smiles that draw new parents into play are soon overshadowed by adult pressures to return to the “real world” of work. Soon, this is followed by a need to demonstrate that their infants, toddlers and young children have successfully met or exceeded developmental milestones. Exchanges labeled as parent-child play are often, on closer inspection, a series of adult directed lessons and tests. After experiencing years of teacher directed instructional experiences within school systems, most adults have this image of adult-child relationships as the only counterpoint to that of disciplinarian. Even when adults spend hours with their child, they may only spend a fraction of time listening for the child’s feelings and thoughts. Allowing the child to take the lead in play is viewed as risky by parents even though it

provides a window into the child's interests and emotions as well as a starting point for expanding understanding and communication.

### Stumbling Blocks: Why don't Parents Play?

#### *Impact of the Workplace*

Parents today are buffeted by a tangle of competing realities and conflicting messages. These are dominated by the view of the world through the eyes of the workplace and the need to create little consumers and producers. The emphasis on *objective metrics of success* and the end products or outcomes are counter to the spirit of play. Adults bring the messages and relationship habits of the work place home, including those that feature competition, hierarchical relationships, and the notion of a system of direct concrete rewards. From this perspective, the use of time needs to be evaluated in terms of productivity. While there can be end products of play, one of its unique characteristics is its focus on the process, immersion in the doing of the activity.

The economic demands of maintaining a family and raising children in an insecure economy are at the top of most parents' worries. With an annual estimated cost of over \$13,480 to care for one child for one year (Lino & Carlson, 2009; Oser & Cohen, 2003), parents find employment issues and financial related decisions and actions occupying the largest share of waking hours. Nevertheless, children between the ages of two and fourteen spend nearly \$30 billion a year primarily on

toys, sugar coated cereals, candy and fast food (Calvert, 2008). At the same time, they influence household expenditures to the tune of \$500 billion on similar products (Calvert, 2008). Researchers have documented that 87% of the money for children's direct expenditures comes from their parents (Calvert, 2008). Toys are expensive, yet parents support their acquisition and accumulation. Marketers have been successful in their campaign to teach parents and children to equate the advertised toys with the phenomena of play itself. Purchasing the toy becomes equivalent to providing the play experience. From this perspective, parents are lulled into considering toys as a substitute for an absent parent. In order to maintain this material culture taught through media messaging, the average middle class American household requires the supported of two wage earners (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

### *Shortage of Time*

Many parents hold multiple jobs not only outside of the home but also within the home and the extended family. While stress levels are high, time is in short supply. Among families with preschool age children, older mothers who work outside of the home spend less time in all activities with children than do younger mothers (Sayer *et al*, 2004) possibly due to the need to put additional time into the work place at the height of their professional careers. This difference has not been documented among married fathers of all ages who spend more time with

their children on weekends than during the average work week (Sayer *et al*, 2004). Even when fathers are at home with their family during the week, they are more likely to spend time alone than with their children (Campos *et al*, 2009), possibly using this time to transition home from the demands of their work environment. While there is evidence that mothers are devoting most of their discretionary time to their children (Sayers, *et al*, 2004), diary evidence provides little indication that this parent time includes play filled activities, particularly if play is viewed from the perspective of the child.

The intergenerational responsibilities of today's parents are another factor that erodes potential play time. As adults postpone parenting, they are more likely to be caring for extended adult family members at the same time that they are caring for their own children (Kuchner, 1988). This can add not only additional financial burdens but as much as 5 hours of home maintenance, cooking, cleaning and transportation chores to a regular work day (Kuchner, 1999). These additional tasks are taken on by the women in the family who even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century regularly provide not only assistance with activities of daily living but also the listening and emotional support time to both nuclear and extended family members.

#### *Parental Roles and the Value of Play*

For many adults, playing with children is seen as frivolous, not a luxury but a waste of time (Roopnarine & Krishnakumar, 2006). The image of the colonial America community that defined the play of children as idleness has continued to shadow our contemporary view of play (Chudacoff, 2007). Mothers from as diverse cultures as Mexico and Italy share the belief that play is irrelevant to children's development and therefore it is inappropriate for parents to be involved in this activity (Haight, 2006). The broad cross cultural rhizomes of this perspective position play as the province of children, an activity that at worst can lead children into trouble in the family and community or create mess and dirt in a household, while at best can be "grown out of" or used to keep children occupied while parents accomplish the important tasks of daily life. Pretend play is particularly suspect. The "as if " quality of this form of play that takes an object, setting or person and represents them as something other than their real identity worries some adults because of its close association with "lying."

Play fosters relationships that encourage participants to engage together on an equal footing. Family structures can lead parents to be wary of egalitarian activities with their children. They fear that these will undermine their hard won authority and impede their ability to discipline their children. Some young adults may have arrived at parenthood in the hope that this new role will place them in a dominant position, a role

that was and may still be, outside of their reach in other settings. The role of play companion is not a part of parental expectations in many communities (Pamar, Harkness & Super, 2008). Although parents are engaged with their children, the structure of their exchanges and the parental definitions of the activity are that they are teaching not playing.

### *Academic Pressure*

Parent- to- parent peer pressure is increasingly motivating parents to focus on academic skill building in younger and younger children. This is fueled by the sales pitches for computer programs, interactive toys and DVDs that promise to turn an infant or toddler into an early reader and ultimately an academic success.

For school age children, the time at the end of the school day and on weekends is increasingly designated as time for academic enrichment, academic tutoring or time to acquire skills for competitive sports. These goals require children to be enrolled in classes or programs or to register for teams or camps taught or coached by experts. Overprotective parents want to make sure that children engage in all activities thoroughly armored with the latest in safety equipment and supervised by responsible adults (Elkind, 2007). An extension of this approach appears in the need to orchestrate and organize a tight schedule of activities. From the parents' perspective, this can be viewed as another form of insurance that will guarantee good grades, access to the next

level of selective education, open doors to selective team sports or protect their children from “getting into trouble” during their free time. The latter is a modern echo of “idle hands are the devils playthings.” This trend is enhanced by the need for adults to compare the performance of their children and to set competitive goals. The need to parent a “winning child” is another way in which the “objective measure of success” reward system of the workplace has been transferred to the parenting arena. As “out of school time” and “out of home play spaces” are transformed into places for adult controlled sports with community based institutional rules and regulations, it becomes increasingly difficult for children to carve out peer play time and space. Redefining the games of play as sports removes the free choice component of play and puts decision making power into the hands of adults. While it institutes safety and adult dictated “fair play” measures, it also demands public assessment and evaluation, strategies that destroy the spirit of play and remove many of its benefits. One of those is the ability to learn collective negotiation and social problem solving among peers. True play offers space for personal choice where children or adults can reflect and learn from the consequences of their actions and decisions within an event limited, framed, non-public domain.

*Finding alternative “master players”*



When parents do not consider themselves playmates, there have often been other family members who took on this role, grandparent, auntie or older sibling. Today, these individuals may no longer be available to the child. Grandma and aunt, along with grandpa and uncle may as often be in another place; living in another country or community, working outside of the home part-time or full-time, or in the case of family elders unable to participate in these activities due to declining health. Uneasiness with the spontaneously violent and/or absurd narratives of children's pretend play can keep even those alternative available adult companions from appreciating the educational value of this play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and its connection with emotional problem solving. Older siblings who often take on a scaffolding role in children's play (Oden, 2006), assisting children to engage in more complex play than they would be able to achieve on their own, are also less available than in past decades as these older siblings have already entered the over-programmed time of their lives. Children often sign up for too many after school activities in order to please their parents (Elkind, 2007).

Although only children never had access to older sibling to guide their incorporation into complex social play, they were more likely to grow up within a neighborhood of similar age children or surrounded by a cohort of cousins. The geographical spread of families and the

decrease in the likelihood of children gathering in spontaneous neighborhood groups eliminates sources of informal peer companionship.

Longer days in group child care settings have the potential for nurturing extended play time with peers and appreciative adults. However, the emphasis on preparing children for academic success has spawned a “push down effect” bringing tasks and sedentary educational strategies from elementary school into the preschool. In a consumer driven approach, profit focused child care environments seek to create an environment that parents will recognize as school like and that will provide their child experiences that mimic kindergarten and first grade assignments and structure activities.

#### Building Blocks: Providing Parents an Understanding of the Importance of Play

Parents who have yet to learn the value of parent-child play are being guided by complex sets of beliefs in the overarching Macrosystem. Changing their understanding of the value of play in general and parent-child play in particular requires education and advocacy at every level of society including the messages of community leaders, educators, and the media. Parents’ lack of appreciation of the value of play mirrors widely held views of other leaders and educators. It can be seen reflected in the actions of the school principle or superintendent who eliminates recess from the school day or the coach who champions the need for enrolling

kindergarten children in little league. Even school teachers who are accustomed to teaching the upper level grades may inadvertently model this message when faced with educating preschool age children. The marginalization of play is rooted in a long cultural history. Contemporary pressures make it easy to justify. .

In order to reframe the importance of play in general, and parent-child play in particular, it is important to view the experience through both the eyes of the parent and the child. Acknowledging the range of goals that adults have for themselves and their children is a first step. Individual goals often include good health, the absence of stress, and lifelong positive relationships with their children. These go along with financial success and social recognition. Parents' goals for their children are complex. Along with academic success, parents often want their children to have self confidence, be able to cooperate with their peers and to be well liked. They also want them to act responsibly when faced with choices and to obey people in authority. Physical coordination, dexterity, grace, and athletic competence and recognition are on the list of goals for many parents. Play can foster all of these skills. Parents who share their own interest in active play encourage children, by example.

### *Stress Reduction and play*

Playing with children and laughing with children can reduce stress and build a history of positive interactions. There is a growing body of

research documenting the health benefits of laughter. Physical play can help muscle coordination and assist with weight control and balance for both parent and child. These in turn can lead to better health outcomes. In short one can play and laugh with a child instead of using an exercise machine. Run, jump, bounce, roll, dance create improvised games that allow the child an equal chance of coming out ahead. These are investments in family relationships as well as exercise.

*Build social and emotional skills through play*

Adults who have social goals for their children can also see gains through parent- child play. Within the play frame, parents can model for children ways to wait, take turns, regulate emotions and cope with disappointments. Young children have demonstrated longer waiting time in the context of a pretend role than when asked to wait as a serious non-play request.

Play can offer a context to prepare for future events. The activity of joint construction or block play provides a vehicle for learning to take turns, to plan, to edit and to participate in joint decision making. Engaging in a board game or game with rules offers multiple turns for parents to demonstrate how to cope with the ambivalent feelings associated with aggression and disappointment, winning and losing. “Playing catch” without a stated goal of winning can create a predictable place, space and time for conversation. It models the give and take within

the day. Parent- child role play or pretend can assist both parents and children in understanding the perspective of others, including how they may feel or act.

### *Mathematics, Science and Literacy in the Play Frame*

Play settings are replete with opportunities to explore concepts in mathematics and physics. Parents as “master players” can make suggestions for the use of materials that will help children recognize geometric shapes, equivalencies and simple machines without quizzing them on their names and relationships. Practice with object substitution in pretend can be viewed as an early foundation for the simple algebra statement “Let “x” stand for an unknown number. Parents can assist children in developing recognition of shapes and letters just by noticing them as they appear within the community or the home. Using descriptive language to reflect children’s experiences during play can be sufficient to offer insights and vocabulary.

While parents may realize how a direct instruction method helps teach academic skills, they have rarely had their own models for observing, listening, reflecting and suggesting in play. The Parent-Child Home Program has been a successful model for families whose poverty has placed their children at risk for academic failure. This home visiting program brings toys and books to toddlers. More importantly, it models for parents how to interact with their children using these resources and

objects. In short, it provides encouraging and supportive adult guides for how to play with a child. The outcome of this four decades old program is well documented. Children entering school from this program graduate at rates better than or equal to children from middle class environments (Gfeller *et al*, 2008). Parents who have participated in the program repeatedly indicate that they have learned not only how to play with their children but also how to listen to them and become more involved with their lives. Observers report that parents show more warmth to their children after participating in the Parent-Child Home Program (Gfeller *et al*, 2008). This type of learning need not be limited to the economically impoverished.

### *Play and discipline*

Parent -child play has the potential to build and nurture emotionally positive parent child relationships. Far from undermining discipline and obedience, play between parent and child can eliminate the need for disruptive behavior as it has the potential to create an emotionally safe place for children to express some of the strong emotions such as confusion, aggression, and anger that are the roots of misbehavior. When parents play with a child, they demonstrate in a language louder than words the value and importance of the child. When preventing dangerous, destructive or hurtful behavior is the goal of parental discipline, this can often be achieved with redirection during

play or humorous reminders outside of play. Light tone reminders drawn from shared story reading or play can substitute for harsh reprimands and punishments. When parents have built a trusting relationship with their child through play, it encourages the child to comply with their parents' requests.

Waiting time is often difficult for young children. Without the skill to fill this time, children resort to bids for attention that parents often confuse with disobedience or destructive behavior. Through parent-child play, children can be offered a model for filling waiting time. Verbal games and rhymes can be effective time fillers that can assist children in learning how to wait or delay gratification. Parents can draw upon their own skills at multitasking to maintain playful exchanges or even pretend scripts with children while cooking, cleaning, running errands or completing family maintenance chores. Empowering parents to provide play activity pockets within the home and within the day can offer them more parenting tools to enrich their own lives.

For some parents, the incorporation of parent-child play into the day may represent a form of culture change. Parents not only need to hear a clear and consistent message that points to the value of parent-child play, they also need specific models of playful approaches along with safe and supportive places to play.

### *Places for Parent Child Play*

For those parents for whom home is distracting, crowded or an uncomfortable place to play, communities can create other inviting havens. One such location can be public libraries. Family Place libraries throughout the United States have developed child and parent friendly environments (Feinberg, Kuchner & Feldman, 1988). In this setting, parents have the opportunity to learn from each other as well as play experts. Toy lending collections can provide age appropriate objects and suggestions to parents and grandparents along with suggestions on how to introduce play materials, how to observe, suggest, and follow through with play activities. Community centers, playgrounds and even religious institutions can set aside parent- child play times for those adults who need to enroll in a course or a program at a designated time in order to justify their parent-child play experience. Some of these opportunities are currently available under the title of Mommy and Me or Daddy and Me programs. Gyms, pools, and fitness centers have begun to fill this gap with designated toddler and parent programming. Recent initiatives with parent-toddler play at museums is another example of a community seeking creative ways to provide both a safe haven for parent- child play and encouraging guides (Sloat, 2009).

The acceptance of play as a therapeutic strategy is recognized in hospitals and health care settings where child life specialist and



recreational therapists use play as a medium for helping children cope with their illness or injury and the events associated with their treatment and hospitalization. Therapists call on play as a strategy for assisting children who are victims of violence or who are wrestling with other emotional challenges within their lives. In contrast to the environment in the United Kingdom where the education of play workers is respected and where these specialists can find employment in communities as play leaders and facilitators, play in the United States has been recognized as a therapy rather than an integral part of life.

Advocacy and education is needed to change the profile of play and to develop both the infrastructure that supports the professional development of play leaders and teachers and simultaneously facilitates a range of community sites and settings that support play. It is time to celebrate the value of play throughout life and recognizes its importance in nurturing creativity, learning and the development of supportive parent-child and family relationships. .

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